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AUTHOR Alleyne, Mekada J.
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ABSTRACT

It is maintained that Great Britain at its very heart is a racist society, in spite of the fact that there has been a permanent black community in Great Britain for 500 years, and members of this commmunity have made positive, productive contributions to British society. In 1731, so many blacks were apprenticed to tradesmen that the Corporation of London prohibited the teaching of trades by London companies. Blacks fought on the British side in the war with the American colonists, and in the first and second World Wars. Other blacks later came to Great Britain in response to recruitment drives in the Caribbean. Recent social policies have not been directed toward eliminating racism, but have centered on assimilation, integration, and pluralism. Within this context, social work based on liberal humanism and the notion of assimilation pathologized black families. Like the rest of British society, the social workers identified blacks as inferior and did not recognize the authenticity of the black experience. It is not surprising, then, that the helping process became a disabling process of service delivery for black families. This argument is developed in discussions of the consequences of misperceiving the strengths of black families, particularly in cases of residential care and transracial adoption, and the increase in numbers of black foster parents. (RH)

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PRESENTATION

NATIONAL BLACK CHILD
DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE
CONFERENCE

ON 12th OCTOBER 1988

HILTON HOTEL, LOS ANGELES,
CALIFORNIA USA

CONFERENCE THEME: EMPOWERMENT

AN IMPERATIVE FOR BLACK
CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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TITLE:

'OUR CHILDREN ARE THE FUTURE'

BLACK FAMILIES AND CHILDREN:
~~AND~~ THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM IN LONDON ENGLAND
EMPOWERING BLACK FAMILIES AND
CHILDREN IN SPITE OF THE
SYSTEM - DEVELOPING MODELS FOR
PRACTICE

PART 1

written by: MEKADA J. ALLEYNE
B.A.(Hons),CQSW
SOCIAL WORK TEACHER
AND CONSULTANT

INTRODUCTION:

MY INTEREST IN THE BLACK PRESENCE IN THE UK STEMS FROM A GROWING AND CONTINUOUS AWARENESS TO DEFINE ME AND MY PEOPLE

FROMA PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE TO UNDERSTAND AND PROVOKE AWARENESS OF THE DEFINITION OF THE IMAGES AND STEREOTYPES OF BLACKS WITHIN A POST-COLONIAL FRAMEWORK.

TO PURSUE AND ATTEMPT TO REDEFINE THIS CONTINUING AWARENESS AND IMAGE OF BLACK PEOPLE IN A CONSTRUCTIVE AND POSITIVE EXPOSITION OF BLACK HISTORY

FOR ME EMPOWERMENT MEANS:
AN UNDERSTANDING AND REALIGNMENT OF ONE'S PERSONAL, RACIAL CULTURAL AND SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES
AND THIS EVOKES A KNOWING OF YOUR TRUE HISTORY, DRAWING ON THE STRENGTHS OF YOUR ANCESTRAL PAST TO GUIDE YOUR FUTURE AND ABOVE ALL FREEDOM AND LOVE.

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'A people without a history is like a tree with no roots'

The African presence in Britain began over 500 years ago and has been well documented by historian Folarin Shyllon. He explains 'Blacks have either been bought and brought or recruited or invited to Britain. Yet each successive generation suffered and suffers legal, economic and social deprivation because of its blackness'. (Shyllon)[1]

When an African Roman legionere set foot on English soil in the year 210 AD he was a forbearer in the long arduous journey for freedom, equality and justice, principles which are still pursued by African descendants today.[2]

Britain at its very heart is a racist society, this is represented in its literature, language political and economic institutions. Historically, social Darwinism, the empire and colonialisation have all nurtured and sustained and maintained the racist nature of British society.

When Queen Elizabeth I in 1596 sent an open letter to the Lord Mayors of London to 'send forth of the lande those kind of people' (meaning black people) she heralded the establishment of institutional racism which has produced negative images of African people in Britain.[3]

For five hundred years there has been a consistent and permanent black community in Britain. However,

we have been the highly visible but invisible people. Our presence only being acknowledged in the post war era as an immigrant population. There has been reluctance to concede that black people have a history and recent studies of Black people have been sociological as opposed to historical.

During the 17th and 18th centuries we were an enslaved people in Britain, many black men, women and children were bought and sold as chattels.

Young black boys and girls were kept as domestic servants particularly by the aristocracy where black children were objects of fashion and status symbols. Many other children experienced the brutality and cruelty of enslavement. Their presence is confirmed in paintings of the period. The National Portrait Gallery in London has several paintings of these children beside their masters and mistresses.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Black people of this period were compliant and did not resist their enslavement. On the contrary, the Black community was a verciferous and potent force in the abolition of slavery.

Despite overt racism, social and economic discrimination, Black people made positive, productive and important contributions to British society. These contributions are a credit to the strengths of Black people despite the adversity they suffered. There were many outstanding Black people such as Phyllis Wheatley, the first Black woman to publish poetry in London in 1773.

Olaudah Equianio, a political leader and spokesman for the Black community, he made important contributions to the abolition of slavery. Ottobah Cugoano, one of the leaders of London's Black community also made a major and important contribution to the abolition of slavery. Ignatius Sancho, a prosperous trader and writer. William Cuffay, one the leaders of the Chartist movement who was transported to Tansmania in 1849. Mary Seacole her contribution to medicine and caring for the injured during the Crimean War.
Ira Aldridge, actor and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor composer and there are many others.
Many Black people learned trades and became self-employed. In fact, so many were apprenticed to tradesmen that in 1731, the Corporation of London prohibited the teaching of trades by London companies depriving Black people of the opportunity to learn skills and trades.[4]
Little is known of the daily lives of Black people during this period but we know that the Black community was strong and the tradition of self help and caring for each other was sustained and enabled Black people to survive the rigours of discrimination. Commentators of the period (1788) reported that 'London abounds with an incredible number of .....Black men who have clubs to support those who are out of place'.[5]

The numbers of Black people declined after Emancipation in 1833 but attempts by the British Government to re repatriate the Black population failed and a permanent Black community continued to survive.

In fact, it was the influx of Black people from America in 1783, many of whom fought on the British side during the American Civil War which helped maintain the existence of the African presence in London. After emancipation in 1833, it was estimated that there were approximately 20,000 Black people living in the main cities of London, Liverpool and Cardiff.

During the first and second World Wars, thousands of Black people perished in the defence of the Empire and we are trying to piece together the contribution made by Black servicemen and women in London. There is a group of ex-servicemen and women who meet together on a regular basis to record their experiences and contributions.

African people from the Caribbean came to Britain in the 1950's and 1960's in response to the many recruitment drives in the Caribbean by London Transport, the Hotel and Restaurant Association and the National Health Service.

Many Black people migrated to Britain with high expectations of a better life, employment, education and opportunity in 'motherland' Britain. However, the 'mother' turned out to be a 'wretched step-mother'. They experienced overt racism and discrimination in every area of social life, education, housing and

and employment. During this period it was not unusual to see adverts written by landlords in shop windows stating 'no children, no coloureds and no dogs'. A study of Black mothers and children in London in 1967 highlighted the housing conditions of many families. Seventy eight per cent lived in one or two rented rooms. Sixty per cent shared a kitchen and bathroom, they expressed difficulties in employment and spoke of the hostility of the white community.[6] These experiences were by no means unusual as a succession of reports such as the PEP studies of 1968 and 1977 continued to show widespread discrimination in employment housing and education.[7]

During the 1960's policy initiatives were directed towards assimilation, 'how are blacks fitting in', how can we integrate black people/immigrants in an attempt to deal with the 'black problem'. A 1965 Department of Education and Science circular, stated that the task of education was defined as the successful assimilation of immigrant children'.[8]

Social policies therefore, were not directed towards eliminating or dealing with the racism which existed but rather reflected the politics of race relations, the arguments were about assimilation, integration and pluralism.

The terms assimilation were further refined to become integration the definition by Roy Jenkins (Minister (who was a Government Minister) is often quoted

'By integration I mean not a flattening process of assimilation but equal opportunities accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. In effect, assimilation by another name. The tradition of social work prides itself on its humanistic values, a caring profession concerned with individuals, deprived communities; agent of change within society. Social work as a profession then, did not find it difficult to embrace the 'colour blind' approach that every potential client or user of the service is the same within the framework of a eurocentric perspective of method and practice. The 'colour blind' approach is one which underpins the concepts of assimilation and integration.

This 'humanistic' approach founded upon liberal traditions and the notion of assimilation of races and cultures, exorts the denial of our blackness and acts as a smokescreen to reinforce racist practices and promotes the view that social work practice techniques are translatable.

Professor Andrew Billingsley succinctly dispels the illusion of colour blindness ' to say that a people have no culture is to say that they have no common history which has shaped and taught them. And to deny the history of a people is to deny their humanity, the black experience has ..... not been uniform, it has varied according to time and place; and its consequences have been diverse and complex'.[9]

The denial of this unique expression of humanity appears incongruent to social work values of equality, justice, the dignity and worth of the individual and the rights of the individual to self determination. On closer examination, the knowledge base of social work theory and practice which draws upon the disciplines of sociology, psychology, child devleopment, social policy and the law has a history of racism. As a direct result of racism, a process of negative valuations of Black people and their experience continues to be an integral part of British society and the social work profession is no exception. By negative valuations, I am referring to the process of identifying Black people as inferior, of lower order and failing to acknowledge, recognise and value the Black experience. One clear example of the framework of negative valuations attributed to Black people has been the descriptions of Black families as deviant, problematic and even pathological in terms of social and psychological developmental processes.

Theories of Black families are very similar to America in the 1960's; Black families are saddled with images of either imposing too much discipline or being too permissive. In any case, they fail to utilise socialising processes in their child rearing making it seem that their children cannot accept or make use of would be 'correct' norms and values of society. The absence of the male presence leading to young black men involving themselves in crime and young women to

sexual promoscuity and teenage pregnancy. (Hall et al 1978, Gilroy 1982).[10]

These views of Black families expounded by researchers 'blames the victim' and images of black people as 'the problem' or at least as having lots of problems emerges.

It is not surprising then, that the helping process becomes a disabling process of service delivery for Black families. Social policy concerned with assimilation, social work reflective of social policy but drawing on the disciplines of sociology and psychology which we have seen pathologising Black families, these came together as a form of covert racism which was instrumental in destroying black family life. This is the foundation upon which the conditions for interaction between Black families and social service departments and in turn led to the disproportionate numbers of Black children coming into the child welfare system.

A major report carried out by the London Borough of Lambeth in 1981 on 'Why Black children came into care'[11] (a rare piece of research which asked the views of the Black community) showed that the social workers involved stressed 'family failings', as if families existed in a vacuum whilst Black families stressed 'material disadvantage' such as poor housing, overcrowding and poor health. This is an indication that Black families were well aware of their disadvantaged position in society whereas social workers failed to take account of racism as it affects the

life chances of individuals and were unable to distinguish between bad parenting and conflict between parents and children. They also misunderstood or underestimated the ability of Black families to rear their children and often intervened inappropriately. They were unaware of the strengths of Black families and the resources available within the community.
So we can see Black families were under severe strain and the very services available to mitigate against our disadvantaged position in society 'wittingly or unwittingly break up homes' and social services was viewed as an enforcement agency.
Black children came into the care system at an alarming rate and many were placed in residential homes rootless and hopeless others were placed with white families. It was difficult to obtain conclusive statistics on the number of Black children in care as they are part of general statistics under the misguided attempt to avoid racial discrimination. There was and is a conspiracy of silence on this matter although it is said that in some boroughs Black children represent up to 56 per cent of the total number of children in care when the total population of Black people does not exceed 20 per cent. It is widely known that 60 to 70 per cent of children in residential homes are Black.[12]

The Rowe and Lambert study entitled 'Children who wait' highlighted the plight of the large numbers of children in the British care system.
Twenty five per cent of children in care who needed families and were simply 'drifting in limbo' were Black. A serious indictment on childcare services and the care of Black children.[13]

During the 1960's and 1970's transracial adoption developed in earnest and was on the increase in part spurred on by the philosophy of assimilation and its role in social engineering. There was a shortage of healthy white babies and couples saw Black children as second best. John Small (one of the first Black Assistant Directors in England) systematic study of transracial adopters has identified some general characteristics; transracial adopters tend to belong to relatively high socio-economic groups and often live some distance from Black communities and insidiously feel they have rescued a black child and are helping the poor black people. White adopters motives may have been laudable but the experience has been a detrimental one for Black children.
Adoption agencies lumped Black children together with physically and mentally handicapped children as 'hard to place' the implication being that black was a form of handicap.[14]

There was a belief that Black substitute families could not be found and in any case the feeling that Black families were lacking in some way was very much part of social work thinking.

In 1983 I worked as a social worker within a Social Services Department and although my brief was to work within the community as part of a patch team, I spent most of my time visiting Black children placed with white families and in residential homes throughout Britain. These children were isolated from the Black community and had little or no contact with Black adults, many suffered from physical neglect in terms of hair and skin care, they had no perception of themselves as Black and had distorted views of Black families. A pattern emerged where the greater number of foster breakdowns were centred on young black boys who no longer young children but black adolescent males posed a threat in terms of stereotypes ie. sexual to white families. Many came back to join Black communities unable to relate to black people their perceptions of Black culture askew and distorted and with a non-existent Black identity. For these children the care system failed to provide the essential ingredients of a substitute home :-

1. enhancing and developing a positive Black identity
2. providing the child with the techniques or 'survival skills' necessary for living in a racist society.

3. developing cultural and linguistic attributes necessary for functioning effectively in the black community.

4. equipping the child with a balanced bicultural experience thus enhancing the healthy integration of his personality.

5. providing continuity of experience based on the reality of British society

6. minimising alienation from the Black community

7. enriching the environment of the child's cultural heritage.

Many of these children are now damaged young black adults rootless and fetless and the statement to be a black child in care is to be fundamentally disadvantaged becomes a true reality.

Within social work practice, the continuing controversy and debate surrounding transracial placements has highlighted the fact that the development of a positive Black identity has been given a very low priority in the placement and care of Black children.

Gill and Jackson, in their research on transracial placements, attached no significance to Black identity and relegated ethnic identity to an irrelevance. Their criteria measuring the success of placements, which were based on relationships with the family, peer group relationships and behavioural disorders' exposed latent social work goals of assimilation and 'colour blind'

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policies .

Gill and Jackson[15] stated that these children were 'white in all but skin colour', did not identify with other Black people and further they held white stereotypical views of Black families. The researchers failed to recognise or acknowledge the identity needs of these Black children and how the consequences of this experience may precipitate emotional difficulties during adolescence for many Black children within the care system.

In fact, Gill and Jackson's research was published in 1983 at a time when the Black community became more aware of the issues and helped to further mobilise Black professionals and the Black community into action. The pioneering work of John Small in New Black Families[16] (which was an independant agency funded by London Borough of Lambeth to recruit Black foster and adoptive parents) demonstrated unequivocally that the Black community is willing and able to provide homes for Black children. The choice for Black children was not a life of institutional care or white families. We have a long tradition of foster care within our community, one of our strengths which has sustained us and maintained our survival.

The barriers to becoming a Black foster parent has continues to be dismantled. Black professionals working within the system made their voices heard.

The Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professions presented a report[17] to the House of Commons Select Committee highlighting the plight of Black

children in care. The report provided the first basic outline of a strategy to radically reorganise child care policy and practice in Britain.

PART II

What was the response of the Black community in the recruitment of Black foster parents and adopters.

community resources

our training programmes

empowering black children

developing models for practice

the way forward

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